

Article

# Revisiting Distant Relations

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**Abstract:** In 2000, I published *Distant Relations: How My Ancestors Colonized North America*, a non-fiction exploration of my own family's involvement in North American colonialism from the 1600s to the present. This personal essay reflects on the context, genesis, process, and consequences of writing this book during a decade of intense ferment in Indigenous-settler relations in Canada amid the revelations of horrific abuse at residential schools and the discovery that my highly respected grandfather had been involved with one. Considering the book from the perspective of 2021, I consider the strengths and limitations of this kind of critical family history and the degree to which public discourses and academic discussion of Canada's history and settler complicity in colonialism have changed since the book was published. Arguing that critical reflection on family history is still an essential part of unlearning colonial attitudes and recognizing the systemic and structural ways that colonial disparities and processes are embedded in settler societies, I share a critical family history assignment that has been an essential and transformative pedagogical element in my university teaching for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

**Keywords:** settler colonialism; residential schools; family history; historical memory; indigenous; ancestors; guilt; accountability; historical consciousness; whiteness



**Citation:** Freeman, Victoria. 2021. Revisiting Distant Relations. *Genealogy* 5: 86. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy5040086>

Received: 3 July 2021

Accepted: 29 September 2021

Published: 3 October 2021

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## 1. Introduction

*“Let us give the term “genealogy” to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today.” Michel Foucault (Foucault 1977, p. 42)*

*Distant Relation: How My Ancestors Colonized North America* was published in Canada in 2000 and in the US in 2002. A non-fiction exploration of my own family's involvement in North American colonialism from the 1600s “right to my own doorstep” (Freeman 2000, p. 440), it is arguably an early example of the “critical” family history this special issue of *Genealogy* explores.

For me, genealogy has been a means to much more than an investigation of my own ancestry: it has been a technique for historical research and a cultural practice and specific form of memory. Following Foucault, it has also been a way to interrogate the history of western colonialism and its forms of knowledge for tactical ends, namely to recognize and help dismantle colonialism's ongoing structures and practices in the present. In *Distant Relations*, I wanted to explore the power relation between public and private realms of experience.<sup>1</sup> Family histories and the historical, social, and political consciousness they engender are not mere personal expressions, but reflect intersubjective processes both within families and in wider communities in both Indigenous and settler contexts. My aim was to explore this relation by connecting “two kinds of memory—or rather non-memory—that have reinforced each other in suppressing knowledge” of settler colonialism's history (and present) with Indigenous peoples: that of the family and that of the state (Freeman 2000, p. xvii)<sup>2</sup>.

*Distant Relations* was published before “settler colonial studies” became a recognized field of study, before “Indigenous” became the preferred and widely used term for original peoples. What follows is a personal reflection on the circumstances that led me to research

and write this particular kind of personal historical narrative and some of what happened when I did so. I want to consider both the possible contributions and limitations of this kind of family history exploration in advancing decolonization in settler societies like Canada and the United States—twenty-odd years ago and today.

## 2. Context for the Book

Growing up as a Canadian child in the early 1960s, I heard two kinds of stories about Indigenous peoples. The first, via television, were stories about the “plight” of “Indians” living under shameful conditions on faraway reserves, apparently because of past mistreatment by the generic “white man”. The other stories were my father’s childhood memories of encounter, cultural difference, “helping”, and gratitude. Every summer when he was a child his family had paddled and camped around Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods in northwestern Ontario, meeting Anishinaabe families along the way, my grandfather (a United Church minister) helping some through hard times, and receiving gifts of moose meat and cradleboards for my father’s twin siblings in return. Growing up, I was inspired by my grandparents’ concern for Indigenous welfare (and indeed for social justice on many fronts) to become an activist of sorts myself. I had no idea that my father’s happy memories of playing with Indigenous children on a dock on Shoal Lake had happened in the context of my grandfather’s involvement with a residential school.

Even as Red Power erupted on television screens in the 1970s, the white people I knew—and they were by and large the only people I knew—acknowledged no real connection to whatever it was that had been done to Indigenous people, though there was a feeling of sad inevitability to it all. Later, as a young would-be activist in the 1980s, I struggled with “an amorphous sense of guilt that I sensed many other people in North America shared, but which was never talked about” (Freeman 2000, p. xiv), a discomfort that lurked in my body and sabotaged my attempts to interact with Indigenous people with integrity. Later, I would discover that the children and grandchildren of Nazi perpetrators of the Holocaust had described a similar silence and nebulous unease while growing up in the shadow of a crime that had apparently happened all by itself.<sup>3</sup>

The immediate catalysts for writing *Distant Relations* were two painful confrontations that interrupted my attempts at activist solidarity. In the mid 1980s, Black women writer/activists confronted me about the assumptions and attitudes that bolstered white privilege in the women’s movement (and in me). In 1993, I deeply offended Syilx/Secwepemc activist and friend, Dorothy Christian, with whom I was working to organize an international gathering of Indigenous writers, artists, and performers.<sup>4</sup> In response to her sharp rebuke, I found myself angrily blurting out, “I didn’t ask to be born here!” In that moment, I realized that I had no idea how I *did* get here, why my ancestors had come to North America or how they had displaced the Indigenous population and ended up with their land. Were they bad people? The personal and political questions that kickstarted my research were never only theoretical or scholarly, but questions I struggled with on the ground, in my life, and especially in my relationships with Indigenous colleagues. As we tried to work together, this unacknowledged history came between us in painful and unpredictable ways.

Many Indigenous people I worked with spoke feelingly about their ancestors even if they did not know the details of their lives. They perceived their ancestors as actively guiding and protecting them, and often expressed gratitude for the ancestral gifts that had enabled Indigenous survival despite tremendous hardship; land was sacred in part because it was the repository of their ancestors’ remains.<sup>5</sup> I envied Indigenous people these deep connections. But how could I honour or respect my own ancestors if they had been colonizers?

Raised an atheist, without any form of spiritual practice, I had rarely given a thought to my progenitors. Saints had long ago replaced ancestors as spiritual intermediaries in the western world (for Catholics at least), while Protestant modernity, with its focus on

“progress” and the self-made man, was fundamentally anti-ancestral in orientation, though more generalized genealogical concepts of “race” and “blood” justified European/White supremacy. I remember the shock of reading the Anishinaabe-Ojibway thinker, Wub-e-ke-niew, who described westerners as living “encapsulated in a present reality which has been severed at its roots”. To them, he said, life “even a mere 200 years ago” is “a dead past” that they do not talk about because they wish to escape it. Time is money and they steal from the future. Because they believe that the young know more than their elders, intergenerational communication has been broken for all but an “artificial aristocracy who define history as only their own” (Wub-e-ke-niew 1995, pp. 97–130, 202). Like most westerners, I thought of “real” history as something written by “objective” historians; genealogy was history’s poor and often embarrassing cousin. Because “history” appeared to be not of our making, we bore no responsibility for its consequences.

Like many North Americans, I knew virtually nothing about my own ancestors beyond my grandparents. I assumed other people’s ancestors had done the colonizing; as far as I knew, my people had come to Canada during the nineteenth century Irish potato famine and had simply inherited a *fait accompli*. I assumed they were decent, well-intentioned people like my present-day extended family, so how could they have condoned or participated in land theft and genocide? And even if they had somehow been party to colonial processes, what was my relation to that?

In the early 1990s, discussions of Canadian colonialism were dominated (and obstructed) by debate about whether Canadians should feel guilty for what had been done by previous generations. This was often framed as warning against the dangerous concept of collective guilt, and debating whether all non-Indigenous people or at least all people of British and French heritage shared in it and if so, the fairness of making present-day Canadians pay for past misdeeds; the concept of a state (and ultimately taxpayers) paying reparations for past human rights violations was relatively new (Barkan 2000). Was I somehow more implicated in colonialism—more guilty, owing more—than people who were postwar immigrants or were none of us accountable for past land-theft and oppression? The overriding assumption in these discussions was that colonialism was an event in the past and that Canada was now a proudly multicultural and tolerant “post-colonial” state that would address Indigenous poverty through the provision of better services, such as job-training programs.

### 3. Process of Research

In 1993, after my argument with Dorothy, “I wanted to understand the attitudes, events, and choices that had fueled colonization, to investigate my inheritance in all its complexity” (Freeman 2000, p. xix). I was fortunate that an aunt had been researching my paternal family’s history for two decades and had reconstructed several family lines going back to the 1600s and in some cases even earlier; she generously shared her research with me. To my surprise, I learned that some of my ancestors had arrived in North America in the early seventeenth century, such as the son of the delightfully named Mercy Jelly, who had married Dominick Wheeler in 1588 in Salisbury, England, the year of the Spanish Armada; John Wheeler had arrived in New England in 1635. My aunt had recorded where ancestors were born, where they married, where they died, and in some cases other stories that had been passed down or discovered.<sup>6</sup> Building upon her research, I started with John Wheeler and other emigrant ancestors and their parents, siblings, spouses, and children, as well as their pastors and community leaders, and tried to establish which Indigenous nation’s territory they came to, how the land changed hands, and the nature of any interactions they had. I searched published genealogies and local, regional, and national histories for my ancestors’ names, then turned to colonial records—early town records, church archives, ships’ passenger lists, diaries, letters, wills, registrations of land sales, treaties, etc. I had no academic background or position to support this research, but again was fortunate that most of these early emigrant ancestors had been English Puritans,

“people of the book”, who kept and preserved voluminous records. Some had also become prominent members of their communities, so were easier to trace.

I quickly discovered that family history is in some ways a variety of historical fiction, since long-dead ancestors are really just ciphers with names; we cannot truly know them or their lives, especially given the fragmentary nature of surviving evidence and how radically worldviews have changed. The patriarchal bias of the records—and of western genealogical practices—was also immediately evident: the assumption that one was more related to people who shared the same patrilineal surname, the paucity of information about wives, the invisibility of single women. Then there was the problem of numbers. Looking back past two parents, four grandparents, and eight great-grandparents, there was an ever-expanding cohort of forebears in each generation, if they did not marry other ancestors: I could trace some lines back 14 generations, but I had 8192 ancestors in the 14th generation alone. It was clearly impossible to “know” my ancestry. On the other hand, individual ancestors of the first generation of settlers in North America had millions of living descendants at the dawn of the 21st century,<sup>7</sup> so many North Americans shared at least some of my history. I hoped the ancestors I wrote about could be emblematic of more general experiences.

There was also the problem that early settler families often relocated frequently so that younger generations could also acquire land or gain access to other opportunities. Following families thus necessitated a transnational history; this allowed me to see transnational patterns and migrations of ideas and practices not readily apparent when the nation-state is the frame, but meant I was soon researching the history of three countries, five American states, two Canadian provinces, several English counties, and fourteen Indigenous nations, over a period of almost 500 years—and that was just my father’s ancestors! It was simply beyond my capacity to also research my maternal relations.

My biggest struggle by far was to “bring my ancestors and Indigenous peoples into the same narrative universe” (Freeman 2000, p. xxi).<sup>8</sup> Few early written records had been produced by Indigenous peoples. Local histories usually dispensed with often generic “Indians” in a paragraph or by their silence left the impression that the land had been vacant before European settlement. Published genealogies largely avoided the fact that the land was already populated and minimized the role of family members in displacing the original inhabitants. I was greatly helped and inspired by the work of a groundbreaking generation of “ethnohistorians”<sup>9</sup> who drew on ethnography and Indigenous peoples’ own ways of culturally constructing and memorializing the past through stories, songs, wampum belts, pictographs, and oral tradition, as well as on colonial sources. I was also able to draw on the invaluable expertise and perspectives of a handful of Indigenous and tribal historians and researchers, including Gladys Tantaquidgeon and Melissa Jayne Fawcett of the Mohegan Tribe; Wendi Starr Brown and Lucille Dawson of the Narragansett Tribe; Abenaki historian Marge Bruchac; Margaret Sault of the Mississaugas of the Credit; Jody Kehego and Kelly Riley of the Chippewas of the Thames; and Haudenosaunee researcher Keith Jamieson. Lucille Dawson turned out to be a descendant of an enslaved Narragansett “owned” by my Stanton ancestors—that was an interesting conversation!

As I began to amass a wealth of detail about individual ancestors, it became clear that my ancestors had been in the thick of multiple colonial processes. Their stories, taken together, illuminated the nitty-gritty processes of colonialism on the ground, confirming that it was not a singular event in the past or the crime of a few immoral or racist leaders, but the result of “millions of actions (or non-actions), great and small, by thousands, even millions of people over hundreds of years (Freeman 2000, p. 452)”. In Patrick Wolfe’s brilliant articulation (which came out as my book went to press), colonialism is a structure, rather than a singular event in the past (Wolfe 1999); my family stories illustrated that this structure was created and perpetuated through individual choices as well as larger forces.

I wrote my book in the midst of fierce public debate about the issue of “presentism”—whether or not it was fair to judge people of the past by present standards of behavior or morality, and to what extent “good intentions” (of the missionaries, especially) and the

context of the times should be taken into account in these assessments. I struggled with the moral complexity of my ancestors' lives even as I came to understand the undeniably destructive consequences of many of their actions. Thomas Stanton, for example, participated (whether willingly or reluctantly and with horror) in the burning alive of hundreds of Pequots in the 1637 Pequot War at the age of 21, two years after he had arrived in North America. Yet later, as tribal overseer of the survivors, he argued with colonial authorities to secure land for them and acted as their protector. For decades, he served as a highly respected forest diplomat and had friendly relations with the Mohegan sachem Uncas especially. This positive relationship between the Mohegans and Stanton was remembered and renewed over many generations, including at a Stanton family reunion in the 1990s, where members of the Mohegan tribal council left tobacco at Thomas Stanton's grave and hosted a small powwow beside his house (which is still in the family connection). John Eliot, the supposed "Apostle to the Indians" of Massachusetts, denigrated Indigenous spirituality but made a brave and lonely defense of his converts from the fury of other Puritans during King Philip's War in 1675. Nine-year-old Elisha Searl was captured in 1704 by an Abenaki/French war party and taken to New France: for a time, he became a "white Indian", before returning to New England as an adult, reclaiming his family's land, and defending the colony in a new war with the Abenakis. Then there was Elijah Harris, a nineteenth century missionary and schoolteacher at two Methodist Indian missions in Upper Canada, and an ally of the famed Mississauga-Welsh missionary Peter Jones who fervently believed Christianity was the key to his people's survival and flourishing. "[I]t was often not the worst but the best of my relatives who were involved in actions or institutions that would prove to be destructive—the ones who tried hardest to act ethically, to honour truth as they perceived it" (Freeman 2000, p. 454). Other less prominent ancestors simply moved onto lands taken illegally or by devious means or turned a blind eye to injustices enacted in their name.

As I wrote in the introduction to the book:

*It is a weighty thing to sit in judgment upon one's ancestors, the very people who begat you. I did not want to be like an adolescent who suddenly discovers all his parents' faults and contemptuously disowns them, without recognizing either what they have given him or acknowledging how much he is like them. . . . I have tried to see [my ancestors] both as they saw themselves to the best of my ability, and from this present perspective, as an outsider, seeing them as they could not see themselves. (Freeman 2000, p. xxiv)*

Nowhere was this balance more difficult than in researching and writing about my grandfather, Rev. E.G. D Freeman,<sup>10</sup> who died in 1972 but was still very alive in the memory of his children and grandchildren. Horrific revelations of physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse at residential schools erupted in the media just as I discovered, in rereading my grandfather's unpublished memoir, that he had been involved with the administration of Cecilia Jeffrey residential school at Shoal Lake, on the Ontario-Manitoba border, in the 1920s.<sup>11</sup> As I wrote in *Distant Relations*, I had grown up thinking of my grandfather as the "epitome of goodness" (Freeman 2000, p. 355); he and my grandmother were among the most highly regarded of their generation in Manitoba, yet residential schools were now condemned for their extreme cruelty and ongoing legacy of suffering.

I would not have had the nerve to visit Shoal Lake without the support and encouragement of Indigenous friends who found me a family to stay with and coached me on Anishinaabe protocol, but it was still very challenging to show up there as a descendant of someone associated with the school. Surprisingly, it helped that I had a personal connection: people could understand me wanting to know about my grandfather and some understood my quest in spiritual terms. I was not just another white researcher robbing them of their stories to further my own career. But still I had to think carefully about what information I sought, and why, what I would do with it, and what I could offer in return.

Meeting residential school survivors and their families brought me face to face with the immensity of Indigenous pain and loss. "How did they get away with what they did?" one anguished survivor cried out. Other stories connected me intimately and at a



heart level to particular families and individuals. The relatives of Cora Mandamin, a star graduate of “CJ” who later lived with my father’s family in Winnipeg while she attended nursing school, recalled how impressed they were as children when she returned from Winnipeg wearing a fur coat—the ultimate symbol of urban sophistication—which turned out to be my great-grandmother’s cast-off. I discovered that the elderly mother of my host Joe Morrison had likely been given my grandmother’s name—Ada—as the school tried to refashion her into a Euro-Canadian schoolgirl. “There in stark simplicity was my relationship to colonialism, there in the attempt to blot out the [Indigenous] identity of a small child, to rename and remake her in the image of my grandmother!” (Freeman 2000, p. 434) I could not erase those connections.

Difficult as it was to be a white outsider at Shoal Lake, it was far harder to talk with my extended family about my grandfather’s involvement with Cecilia Jeffrey. Here the collision of public and family discourses was harshly evident. My extended family was very prominent in the United Church of Canada—an aunt had been its elected leader—and my grandparents had been at the heart of my extended family’s sense of identity. My grandfather had been a socially active and progressive man for his time, yet his conviction of the superiority of Christianity and western culture had contributed to the terrible pain and destruction that the school had caused.

As public criticism of the church-run, government-funded schools mounted, as horror story after horror story emerged, many members of the churches felt themselves under siege and feared that their churches would be bankrupted out of existence by a tsunami of lawsuits by former students (Valpy 2000). It was a challenging context in which to circulate my manuscript among family members before publication, especially as I had barely known my grandfather and was not a member of the church. I needed to let them know what I was doing and hoped they would help me understand and correct errors of fact or interpretation. But I was also asking them to undertake a painful reassessment of a beloved father or grandfather.

Not surprisingly, some family members became extremely angry with me. Denial may have been a factor, but I think there was also the fear that our family would be singled out, the family reputation destroyed. Others felt I misjudged my grandfather’s role, pointing out that while he may have been present at certain meetings or even involved in certain actions, because of the paucity of records we still did not know what positions he himself took or what he could realistically have done to counter various decisions. (This was a good reminder that the dead cannot answer back, and that most people historians write about have no one to defend them). Some hotly told me that I would not have done any better than my grandfather, and they were probably right. One relative said the Anishinaabeg were taking advantage of me, using me for their own purposes, while another said finally someone was telling the truth about our family. An uncle painstakingly reviewed the manuscript three times to try to offer constructive feedback despite how upsetting it was for him. To my astonishment, some family members assumed my motive in writing about my grandparents was to get back at them for refusing to attend my father’s wedding to his first wife (not my mother), because she was a Catholic! (That was family history I was not even aware of.) “You think those were Distant Relations?” one cousin warned me ominously, as he likened publication of the book to jumping off a cliff, while other family members reassured me I was asking difficult but necessary questions.

I will be eternally grateful for the support of Indigenous friends and colleagues such as Dorothy Christian, Helen Thundercloud, Al Hunter, Mary Alice Smith, and Susan Dion who helped me weather my family’s initial reactions and who affirmed the value of my work. At a critical moment, Helen Thundercloud gifted me with sacred tobacco from the Black Hills of South Dakota. Elder Walter Redsky, who had attended the school at Shoal Lake and even recognized my grandfather from a photograph, honoured me with an eagle feather. Rev. Stan McKay, the first Indigenous moderator of the United Church of Canada, who had known my grandfather well, assured me that my portrayal of him was balanced and fair, and that, if anything, my portrayal of residential schools was not

hard-hitting enough. Looking back, I know this latter criticism is true. As horrific stories of abuse appeared with increasing frequency in the media in the late 1990s, many mainstream commentators—but even some Indigenous people, such as a close friend of mine who was herself a survivor—believed the media reports were exaggerated or isolated incidents or only true of some schools. While many survivors had given testimony earlier in the decade at the ground-breaking hearings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Dussault and Erasmus 1996), these accounts were not yet widely known (or believed) outside of Indigenous communities, and many Indigenous people had not yet broken their painful silence even to their own families. The full extent of abuse and neglect would be corroborated as the widespread experience of thousands of others through the research and testimony gathering of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). Back in the late 1990s, I remember hoping that CJ had seen less abuse because of the extraordinary activism of the students' parents (Freeman 2003) and its first location right next to the reserve at Shoal Lake, but later research would uncover more abuse at Cecilia Jeffrey, especially at the later Round Lake site, including shocking nutritional experiments (Mosby 2013). I know my fear of further upsetting my family also made me cautious in writing about the devastation of the schools.

What I learned from all this was how powerful family discourses are, how like other discourses they determine what can and cannot be said. As I wrote in *Distant Relations*: “The psychic history of each family is embedded in both what is said and what is left unsaid; what is not talked about, repeated, or passed down can be as important, even more important, than what we are conscious of” (Freeman 2000, p. xvii; Drinnon 1980, xxiv). Family stories reinforce certain values and worldviews that affect how we view and interpret history. Families are also a major mode of transmission of settler attitudes about Indigenous people. To change one's view of this past can be to question one's very identity.

Interestingly, some people also said to me “You could never have written that book in academia”, by which they meant that academic historians generally write as omniscient narrators who do not reveal emotion or any connection to the material. That was far more true then; there has been much more academic interest and respect for autoethnography and other unconventional forms of narrative historical scholarship over the past twenty years. In *Distant Relations*, I worried, felt shame and horror, asked speculative questions, bore witness, and mourned. As in more traditional storytelling, there was a performative aspect to what I was doing: I could be a stand-in for others. It is interesting to me that some people who would never normally go near almost 500 pages of very detailed microhistory read my entire book—a friend's mother staying up all night to do so—I think because it was told as a personal narrative. Yet *Distant Relations* was also accepted as equivalent to a master's degree, and in 2002 I was admitted into the University of Toronto's PhD program in history because of it, despite my lack of formal academic training in the discipline.

#### 4. After Publication

One of the taglines in the McClelland & Stewart catalogue listing for *Distant Relations* brought the personal angle of my book to immediate attention: “Have you ever considered you might be living on stolen land?” Suddenly the book was launched and I was doing nine media interviews in one day, reducing my seven year exploration of the complexities of colonial history to 30-second sound bites on radio and TV. The reviews and media coverage reflected the social preoccupation with guilt and blame—I was invited to speak on an Aboriginal People's Television Network talk show to respond to the question: “Does White Guilt Help Anyone?” A *Toronto Star* reviewer wrote: “[Freeman] puts a uniquely personal spin on 400 years of ethnic cleansing by tracing her own family's role as perpetrators . . . As for all us later immigrants . . . we could never have come to make a better life in Canada if the dirty work hadn't already been done. That makes us accessories after the fact and makes the story of Freeman's ancestors our own” (Werner 2000). This reviewer noted approvingly my quoting of Anishinaabe playwright Drew Hayden Taylor's comment that

he did not think we should feel personally guilty for what our ancestors had done, but “if things haven’t changed in 20 years, then I expect you to feel guilty!” (Taylor 1998).

“Let’s not rush to pay the native guilt bill” was the headline for a dismissive rant against my “500-page tale of woe” in a conservative newspaper.

*Make no mistake about it, our civilization was built on and by the virtues practised by the early settlers, in the face of unimaginable hardship: hard work, discipline, thrift, emotional continence, and moral (for them) probity. To treat their work, and that of the thousands, then millions who came after, as grievous sin, without equally praising them, is both self-destructive of our own well-being and of our future... “Spare me your weepy icky white guilt.”. (Nickson 2001)*

Another reviewer wrote:

*For generations, most of us have been able to practice a sweeping cultural denial that allows us to live with this terrible disparity. It was not me, we whisper when conscience pricks, who caused the genocide that resulted in the destruction of more than 90 per cent of native North Americans on the heels of European contact; not me who precipitated the segregation, even apartheid, of our original peoples that exists in Canada even today. It was others, long ago . . . In Distant Relations, Victoria Freeman . . . turns an array of horrendous incidents into family history, and by extension shows how we are all responsible for our colonial history of repression and our tolerance of injustice today. . . . By meticulously (at times painstakingly) painting each period in context, she shows how ordinary, decent folk were able to treat others “in a manner outside the sanctions of their own morality and law” . . . The result is remarkably even-handed, and all the more appalling for its nonjudgmental tone. (Huck 2001)*

The book received startlingly different receptions in Canada and the US. In Canada, it was one of four finalists for the prestigious Writers’ Trust Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing. In 2002, it sank like a stone when it was released by an American publisher in post-9/11 America, where readers and reviewers were not in the mood to consider any form of American wrongdoing and Indigenous issues were eclipsed by Black–White tensions and the call for reparations for slavery.

Individual readers wrote me to tell me that my quest to understand my ancestors’ actions led them to consider new questions about their own, that I had offered them a way to locate their personal narrative within larger ones. “Your book is a pace setter, an example of what lies under the surface of genealogical pursuit. It will stimulate many I’m sure to dig deeper”. “Thank you for inspiring my own learning and reflection process”.

In Canada, the book was used to spark “community dialogues” organized by Indigenous and local community organizations, church groups, universities, and activist organizations in a number of communities across Canada. These included an event sponsored by the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto and Toronto’s St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts; an event asking “What have we learnt through 400 years of Aboriginal-Newcomer encounters on Turtle Island?” hosted by the University of Winnipeg/Menno Simons College Conflict Resolution Studies program; and “A Kenora Conversation . . . an opportunity for all community members to share their thoughts on our shared history and future hopes for First Nations-newcomer relations in Northwestern Ontario”, the latter sponsored by Ne Chee Friendship Centre, Kenora Race Relations Committee and Kenora Anishinaabe-kweg Aboriginal Women’s Organization. The Kenora event was an emotional evening as 30 to 40 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people sat in a sharing circle, including survivors who had attended Cecilia Jeffrey residential school, church people—some of whom knew my United Church relatives—and concerned townspeople.<sup>12</sup>

At this and other similar events, I saw firsthand the role that this kind of personal historical telling could play in processes of reconciliation.<sup>13</sup> My acknowledgement of my connection to the history of colonization seemed to free people from both groups to share their own stories and locate themselves in this history as well—and to hear each other. The architects of this evil and oppressive system were no longer simply an Other that



we all—whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous—distanced ourselves from, but fallible human beings we were still connected to and whose actions we could not simply run away from. The Indigenous sharing circle format was ideal for this kind of exploration and community-building, as it was opened by elders with ceremony and medicines to calm the mind and spirit, affirmed Indigenous knowledge and spiritual practice from the outset, and emphasized that we were all in this together, since we faced each other with no one's back turned on anyone else. We were supported in sharing painful stories and this sharing was a holistic layering of thought and experience rather than an argument over who was right or wrong. As I would later write, "in acknowledging our connection, we can acknowledge the ways that history shapes our present and the roles available to us, that it defines the historical tasks and ethical obligations that we are born into"<sup>14</sup> (Freeman 2008) I would often observe how this history was held in both Indigenous and settler bodies: the deep pain of Indigenous people was clearly excruciating to reexperience, while settler-descendants would twist and turn with unacknowledged shame and guilt as they spoke about their ancestors.

Following publication, I spoke at a number of events organized by Indigenous Christians or mainstream churches who had been involved in residential schools.<sup>15</sup> By far the most difficult was a United Church meeting of the congregations of Manitoba and North-western Ontario, which that year was held in Winnipeg at United College, University of Winnipeg, the very place where my grandfather had been Dean of Theology. Mainstream church members, including several members of my family and people who had known my grandparents, were coming together with Indigenous Christians of Keewatin Presbytery—many of whom were deeply affected either directly or intergenerationally by the trauma of residential schools—for the first time in several years, after a period of tension and rupture. Given my own tense relations with some of my family members over the book, and the responsibility I felt to acknowledge the wrongdoing of residential schools to survivors, speaking to both groups at once in that particular space and trying to reconcile their seemingly irreconcilable perspectives in my own being was incredibly stressful. The night before my talk, I feared the terrible pain in my chest meant I was about to have a heart attack—but looking back I think it was heartbreak.

Somehow the next day I found my words. I was shocked and surprised when my uncle came up after I spoke, gave me a hug, and said, "You did good, kid!" I felt relieved when some Indigenous attendees thanked me; others appeared perplexed—I do not think they had heard a white person say such things before and my words were likely triggering for them. I was heartened to later hear from the conference planning committee that "people commented that you were the voice that was challenging to hear because you modeled for us the "getting to know our ancestors" that we must try to do. One of the committee members said "Victoria was the one that I really listened to because she showed me the path I need to step onto". We also appreciated that with the Conference being at the U of W and with some of your family members present, that this was probably a time of mixed emotions . . . "

The obvious value of these community dialogues led to the developing conviction that both Indigenous and settler peoples needed to "decolonize within"—i.e., do their own emotional processing and healing work. Both groups needed to dismantle at least some of the psychological structures of colonialism to even begin to work together on the larger systemic changes required for economic and political decolonization. A group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous friends and colleagues, including Dorothy Christian, Mary Alice Smith, Cuyler Cotton, and others worked with me to find ways to broaden the discussion beyond single events in particular communities. In 2001, we created Turning Point: Native Peoples and Newcomers On-line (Freeman 2010a), an early moderated website for respectful dialogue and information sharing between Indigenous and settler peoples, which was active for several years. I also took on numerous speaking engagements with Indigenous colleagues, especially Dorothy Christian and later Lee Maracle, on "finding common ground", working as allies, "decolonizing within", (Christian and Freeman 2010)

etc., and with other settler scholars such as Lynne Davis and Chris Hiller on “transforming settler consciousness.” I was invited to help organize several ground-breaking conferences, including the 2006 Alliances: Re/Envisioning Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Relations conference at Trent University and a Toronto regional gathering of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2012.

These activities reflected anticolonial organizing of a particular moment and were largely between white settler-descendants and Indigenous peoples. By 2017, when residential school survivors and staff from Toronto Council Fire Native Cultural Centre co-developed and co-taught a Sociology course on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with me to a class of mainly racialized students at the University of Toronto, Scarborough,<sup>16</sup> the focus of anticolonial work was shifting to alliances between Indigenous and other racialized people; these brought together anti-racist and anti-colonial organizing to challenge white supremacy.

### 5. *Distant Relations Today*

A family history approach to discussions of colonialism and decolonization has its limitations. Perhaps not surprisingly, the least receptive audiences I encountered were those settler descendants most invested in genealogy as an identity resource and source of patriotism, where, to borrow from Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson, they used genealogy to create narratives of belonging that legitimized and indigenized their place as settlers in North America (Johnston and Lawson 2000). This was most evident to me at a meeting of the Toronto chapter of the Society of Mayflower Descendants, when the entire membership began the meeting by standing and reciting the Mayflower Compact of 1620 with great fervour, while having little knowledge of their ancestors’ violence in displacing Indigenous peoples, such as during King Philip’s War. Historically, genealogy has also been used to support an imperialist British-Canadian nationalism which expressed pride in Canada as an expanding white settler dominion in the British Empire and reinforced concepts of social Darwinism, Anglo-Saxon superiority, Canadian superiority to Americans, and the white man’s burden (Morgan 2001; Thobani 2007). Even my book, by emphasizing the number of generations that my ancestors have been in North America, risks making an “indigenizing” move.

In a city like Toronto, Canada, where the majority of residents are recent immigrants or migrants from other parts of the country, too much focus on early emigrant ancestors may let later immigrants off the hook. Individual settler histories, while emphasizing the agency that we all have to make change and helping us understand the historical processes that have created the current situation, can obscure the fact that colonialism is now a structure that perpetuates itself without any effort or intention on the part of present-day populations.

I also recognize that *Distant Relations* is a privileged history: there is great inequality in who has access to family memory and especially written records, with the greatest losses for oppressed peoples, such as enslaved people, Holocaust survivors or Indigenous peoples who were violently removed from family contexts (and also many adopted people). Furthermore, as numerous scholars and activists have pointed out, not all non-Indigenous people are “settlers” in the same way or have benefited from colonialism to the same degree; many are not in the same relation to white privilege or Indigenous struggles as I am (see Lorenzo Veracini 2010 account of the tri-partite structure of settler colonialism, with racialized populations serving as an “exogenous Other”<sup>17</sup>). Written before the critique of “whiteness” gained ground, *Distant Relations* gives insufficient attention to questions of white privilege and especially inherited privilege maintained over generations. My book also centres white voices and perspectives—no matter how “critically”—rather than Indigenous ones. While I fully recognize that decolonization must be an Indigenous-led and Indigenous-centred movement, I hope that *Distant Relations* helped to “unsettle” the conventional settler narratives that were then taught in schools, related in local histories, or passed down in families—by challenging colonial silence and denial, the erasure of colonial

violence from “our” history, and the perpetuation of settler ignorance that maintained a posture of innocence. It certainly made my own positionality much clearer to me and reversed my own lens from “helping Indigenous people” to my own implication—and that of my forebears—in colonial dynamics past and present.

Given the repeated relocations of settler families in North America and the fact that settlers and later immigrants are by definition displaced, the issue of place—and especially recognition of Indigenous place—gets relatively short shrift in many settler genealogical accounts, including in *Distant Relations* (tellingly, I did not include original Indigenous place names on maps, for example). Family genealogy may help settlers understand where they came from, and how they ended up with the land and power they have, but it does not reveal much about the deep history of the Indigenous lands they now live on. For this reason, I decided to conduct a different kind of genealogical research for my 2010 PhD dissertation, one that turned the lens on the “colonial amnesia” of Toronto, a city that until recently seemed completely unconscious of over 11,000 years of Indigenous life on the land and where “the colonial past and the people affected by it appeared to be completely absent, as if colonialism never happened—or as if it has been completely accomplished” (Freeman 2010b)<sup>18</sup>.

As I write these words in August 2021, the Canadian federal government has recently passed Bill C-15, a bill to align Canadian law with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It is too soon to know how genuine or far-reaching this effort will be, as Bill C-15 appears to incorporate UNDRIP within the existing colonial constitutional framework rather than harmonize Canadian law with UNDRIP, but its adoption certainly signals a sea change in public rhetoric and historical consciousness since *Distant Relations* was published. In some ways, we have moved on as a society from debating whether we should feel guilty and whether present generations should pay reparations for past actions by the state or a society’s major institutions. It is now generally acknowledged in mainstream media and by most federal and provincial governments that Canada is still in a colonial relationship with Indigenous peoples. No less than the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court publicly acknowledged in 2015 that the government’s past actions, particularly in relation to the forced assimilation attempted at so-called “residential schools”, constituted cultural genocide<sup>19</sup>, though there is still significant resistance to that term in some quarters. A form of reparations has now been paid to most survivors of those institutions, although through a deeply flawed and retraumatizing process.

Yet the recent identification of the sites of unmarked graves of hundreds of Indigenous children on the grounds of several former so-called “schools”—with thousands more such burials still to be located) is a shocking reminder that these payments were only first steps in a long and arduous journey to heal, repair, and transform the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canada. The disrespectful treatment of Indigenous children even in death has graphically illustrated to settler Canadians the incalculable trauma inflicted on Indigenous families and communities. Perhaps for the first time, many non-Indigenous families have imagined such terrible separation and trauma in their own families and comprehended the pain of Indigenous family histories, sparking numerous acts of solidarity such as placing orange shirts or children’s shoes on display on people’s front lawns or porches or in public places in cities and towns across Canada. There have been many calls for further reparative actions by the state and especially by the Catholic Church, which ran the majority of these institutions yet avoided paying its share of reparations (Warick 2021).

Over the past decade, both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls have rigorously documented the far-reaching, ongoing, and devastating impacts of colonialism on Indigenous people in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019). Yet, colonial structures remain deeply entrenched, governments and corporate interests continue to extract resources from Indigenous lands without consent, and Indigenous people must still put their bodies

on the line to defend their remaining lands and way of life—and are criminalized when they do so. Unfortunately, it will take far more than changed rhetoric, symbolic action, or even financial reparations to truly decolonize Canada, when so-called Indian reserves constitute a meagre 0.2% of the country’s land mass and are legally federal Crown Land (Pasternak and King 2019, p. 24).

## 6. Family History as Pedagogy

Despite the huge increase in public awareness and recognition of Indigenous peoples in the public sphere, it is still the case that most non-Indigenous Canadians will likely replicate colonial patterns until they acknowledge their own relation to colonialism and the many ways they continue to perpetuate it and benefit from it. For these reasons, I believe that critical reflection on family history is still an essential part of unlearning colonial attitudes and recognizing the systemic and structural ways that colonial disparities and processes are embedded, inherited, and maintained in settler societies by individuals as well as by institutions and governments. A critical genealogical practice can help settlers acknowledge their own responsibility to disrupt these patterns, rather than offload it onto others; it can deepen their “ownership” of the problem and commitment to working for systemic change. It can also encourage them to think historically and develop the capacity for genealogical critique (in the Foucauldian sense) of other taken-for-granted aspects of colonialism, such as written treaty texts and the state’s unilateral assumption of underlying “Crown sovereignty” (a legal fiction based ultimately on the Doctrine of Discovery that legitimates the state’s appropriation of Indigenous lands and jurisdiction).

To help both Indigenous and non-Indigenous university students engage in this kind of critical reflection, I developed a family history assignment inspired by my experience of researching my own family history for *Distant Relations* and witnessing the impact of the book on others;<sup>20</sup> the assignment also draws on Indigenous pedagogical concepts such as learning as a process of reciprocity and the importance of understanding “self-in-representation.”<sup>21</sup> I offer it here as my contribution to a growing literature on anti-colonial pedagogies and the transformative power of critical settler genealogical practice.<sup>22</sup>

For the assignment, students are asked to write a personal reflection on their relationship to colonialism and that of their family and ancestors; they do not need to do research or provide footnotes and are free to write about personal experiences and emotions as well as facts, if these relate to colonialism and the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

*You may have been impacted by colonialism in multiple ways and in different countries. It may be part of your birth or adopted family history as either colonizers or colonized (or both); it may affect what you do or don’t do, who or what you know, and how you see yourself or others in the present. It may be something that is talked about in your family or among your social circle or not talked about.*

*If you or your family or ancestors emigrated to what is now called Canada, think about where your family has been most connected to land, and whose territory you or your ancestors came to when they moved here. Whose territory do you now live on, if you have moved to attend university? If you don’t know, think about why you don’t know.*

*If you are of Indigenous ancestry, you may wish to reflect on your people’s traditional territory and if you and your family are still connected to it.*

*If you don’t know your ancestry because of adoption or other reasons, please reflect on your own experience of colonialism in Canada and what you learned about it through your adopted family, friends, and society at large.*

*You do not have to disclose that you are adopted or any other personal information you don’t feel comfortable sharing.*

*Finally, reflect on how your own experiences of colonialism may influence your learning about Indigenous peoples and Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in Canada. How might your personal and familial history contribute to your challenges and opportunities in supporting decolonization or in being an ally? There will be many different answers.*

After completing this assignment, students are invited to share their reflections in class (to the extent that they are comfortable doing so). As I wrote in an article on my pedagogy published in the *Canadian Journal of Native Education* (Freeman 2018, p. 118), the “diverse family histories of students become a resource for understanding not only their individual positionality but the global impacts and histories of colonialism, and the multiple ways that all of us are shaped by the past and constituted through social forces”. The assignment helps non-Indigenous students “consider the colonial dynamics of the countries they or their families originally emigrated from and the similarities and differences of these dynamics with Indigenous struggles” (Freeman 2018, p. 117); it helps Indigenous students understand more about their family’s and community’s displacements and struggles and intergenerational traumas. Such deep and holistic sharing is often a revelation to students, most of whom have never had the opportunity to learn about or from their classmates; they have also rarely been exposed to Canadian, world, or transnational histories that interrogate the taken-for-granted existence of settler states.

This sharing of family stories helps all students more clearly locate themselves and recognize that we all start in different places and have different knowledge and perspectives to contribute in working in alliance towards the common goal of decolonization. The stories spark new conversations not only in the classroom but also at home; often, students start talking to parents and family members about their family history for the first time and these conversations about history, colonialism, and Canada continue after the course. The assignment helps all students value their own particular history and process the emotions that talking or even thinking about their relation to colonialism brings up, including defensiveness, anger, guilt, shame, grief, confusion, and fear. Some of the transformations I have witnessed among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students through this practice of “critical genealogy” have been truly life-changing and have deepened students’ engagement with decolonization. I know that was also true for me in writing *Distant Relations*.

## 7. Conclusions

When I first started asking the questions that eventually led me to write *Distant Relations: How My Ancestors Colonized North America*, I felt completely alone and even guilty for investigating my family’s role in colonization. I remember when I first met another white “ally”: we jokingly referred to ourselves as “colonial traitors”. That is how it felt and how many other Euro-Canadians perceived me—as disloyal to my own family and culture. But I do not believe that love and honesty are antithetical. If critical settler family history does anything, I hope it foregrounds the complex web of human experience and human choices and our embeddedness in historically constructed social dynamics that can blind us to the hurtful consequences of our actions. I hope it also helps people understand that history is not something “out there”, a chronicle of battles or leaders, or only the province of academic historians. We are all makers and passers-on of history. The villains of history are our relatives, as are the victims. I think of the prayerful Indigenous closing words: “All My Relations”, which include other-than-human relatives as well. Critical family history teaches us that history runs through all of us, through our bodies, our families, our memories, and the stories we tell our children. In exploring my own family’s history with Indigenous peoples in *Distant Relations*, I learned to recognize the human face of colonialism—including the face in the mirror.

**Funding:** This article received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.



**Acknowledgments:** I would like to express my gratitude to all my teachers, and especially those impacted by the trauma of residential schools. I am heartened that *Genealogy* has devoted a special issue to Critical Settler Family History and I am profoundly honoured to be included. I wish to thank my peer reviewers for their useful comments.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, paraphrased in Michael Jackson (2002, p. 12).

<sup>2</sup> Much of my discussion in the first section of this paper draws on the introductory chapter in *Distant Relations*.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Sichrovsky (1988) and Reichel (1989).

<sup>4</sup> Beyond Survival: The Waking Dreamer Ends the Silence was an international gathering of Indigenous writers, performing artists, and visual artists, co-organized by the En'owkin International School of Writing, the Canadian Native Arts Foundation (now Indspire), and the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now Canadian Museum of History) in April 1993.

<sup>5</sup> See Freeman (2011, pp. 180–221).

<sup>6</sup> She conducted most of this research before the advent of the internet, mostly through the records of the Church of the Latter Day Saints.

<sup>7</sup> An estimated 10 million living Americans and as many as 25 million people worldwide are descendants of passengers on the Mayflower, for example, according to the General Society of Mayflower Descendants. For descendants of the first generation of emigrants to the New England colonies, the numbers would be much higher.

<sup>8</sup> Freeman (2000, p. xxi). I borrowed this concept from Kerwin Lee Klein (1997).

<sup>9</sup> Francis Jennings' *The Invasion of America* (Jennings 1975) and the works of James Axtell were revelations to me as I began my research. Early ethnohistorians of Indigenous-settler encounters were mainly white; the contributions of Indigenous historians have greatly enriched the field.

<sup>10</sup> Much of this discussion about the challenge of writing about my grandfather is taken from a paper I presented at the 2004 Rupert's Land Colloquium, held in Kenora, Ontario.

<sup>11</sup> While he was not a staff member at the school, in his capacity as head of the "Indian Committee" of Winnipeg Presbytery, he acted as a liaison and advisor to the Women's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church, which ran the school. In this capacity, he fired one principal in 1923, installed another, visited the school once every two months for the next year in a supervisory capacity, and arranged for a missionary to be appointed to proselytize the Anishinaabeg of the Lake of the Woods area. He was also involved in early efforts to choose a new site for the school, but not its final selection, as by that time he had joined the newly formed United Church of Canada (a union of Methodist, Congregationalist and some Presbyterian congregations), while while the school remained under the jurisdiction of those "continuing" Presbyterians who opted not to join. For more details, see chapters 19 and 20 of *Distant Relations*.

<sup>12</sup> I would later meet more survivors from Cecilia Jeffrey, including relatives of people my family had known, at a talk I gave at Kenora's Lake of the Woods Museum in 2008, to accompany *Bakan Nake'ii Ngii-izhi-gakinoo'amaagoomin: We Were Taught Differently: The Indian Residential School Experience*, its exhibit on the history and legacy of three local residential schools, including CJ. The talk was entitled "Considering My Grandfather's Involvement in Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School."

<sup>13</sup> I agree with Indigenous critiques of top-down state-sponsored attempts at reconciliation, but believe grassroots reconciliation processes can help build the relationships and alliances necessary for decolonization. See my article "In Defense of Reconciliation" (Freeman 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Another event I spoke at was a workshop organized by the Anglican Church's Huron Diocese, at the invitation of the Huron Lenni Lenape Algonkian Iroquoian Council, Chippewa of the Thames First Nation, Ontario, in 2005.

<sup>15</sup> The development and co-teaching of this course is discussed in "Becoming Real on Turtle Island: A Pedagogy of Relationship" (Freeman 2018).

<sup>16</sup> The development and co-teaching of this course is discussed in "Becoming Real on Turtle Island: A Pedagogy of Relationship" (Freeman 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Lorenzo Veracini (2010, p. 16ff). See also the debate sparked by Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua in their article "Decolonizing Antiracism" (Lawrence and Dua 2005) on whether Black people in Canada should be considered settlers.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Jennifer Cole quoted in Shaw (2002, p. 49).

<sup>19</sup> Remarks by Rt. Hon. Beverley McLachlin, Chief Justice of Canada, delivered in a speech entitled "Reconciling Unity and Diversity in the Modern Era: Tolerance and Intolerance" reported in (Aboriginal Peoples' Television Network National News 2015).

<sup>20</sup> This assignment is discussed in more depth in my article "Becoming Real" (Freeman 2018, pp. 116–19).

<sup>21</sup> To learn in relationship according to this ethic requires being conscious of one's relation to one's inner self, family, community, and natural environment according to Greg Cajete (2016, p. xvi).

- <sup>22</sup> See for example the special issue of *Genealogy* guest edited by American educator Christine Sleeter (2020) on “Genealogy and Critical Family History” as well as her other publications on critical pedagogies; and *Canadian Journal of Native Education* (2018), Special Issue on “Challenges, Possibilities and Responsibilities: Sharing Stories and Critical Questions for Changing Classrooms and Academic Institutions”, edited by Lynne Davis, Jan Hare, Chris Hiller, Lindsay Morcom, and Lisa K. Taylor.

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